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# What Writers Do. The Value Of Literary Imagination

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RICHARD ELDRIDGE

## What Writers Do. The Value of Literary Imagination

Why is imagining things in words a serious business in relation to the rest of life? If it involves free fantasizing about anything whatsoever, then what does that have to do with the real? If it is instead responsive to reality and explores real possibilities, then why not explore reality directly instead? And what is the value of the imaginative rendering in words of *actual* objects, as in lyric poems occasioned by actual scenes or incidents?

R. G. Collingwood offers a useful account of the role of art in general in relation to life, in holding that art serves as a vehicle for the clarification of feeling and the overcoming of corrupt consciousness. But he says little about exactly how this work of clarification is done in words by means of poetic figuration.

G. W. F. Hegel's account of literary imagination focuses primarily on poetic figuration as it is embodied in lyric poetry. By tracing the work of poetic imagination in lyric, where that work is foregrounded in relation to actual experience (though poetic imagination is also present within the making of all works of art), Hegel helps us to see both how poetic imagination in general works in relation to feeling in all the arts and how it works in particular by means of words in works of lyric, literary art. Hegel shows specifically, in contrast with some contemporary theories of literary imagination, how poetic imagination takes up materials from actual life and subjects these materials to figuration and emplotment, in order to achieve not freedom from feeling, but freedom *in* feeling. The advantages of Hegel's account in showing how poetic imagination begins from actual experience and remains focused on it, as opposed to theories that appeal to more segregated pretense or simulation (Walton, Currie, Feagin), are considered, and Hegel's account is defended against some possible objections. It is crucial to grasp that Hegel treats lyric poetry as *both* an especially salient form of modern literary art *and* as proceeding from the same power of poetic imagination that is involved in the making of all works of art.

That Hegel's views help us to make sense of the role of poetic imagination in life, in its engagements with the actual, is argued for by considering recent accounts of the experience of reading that have been put forward by Rita Felski, Susan Stewart,

and Kirk Pillow, together with some further comparisons to Aristotle's treatment of mimetic representation and Wittgenstein's account of imaginative seeing-as.

Finally, the work of poetic imagination in words, in engaging with the actual for the sake of the clarification of feeling, is illustrated through a close reading of Rilke's ›Der Panther‹. The speaker-viewer's experience of the caged, pacing panther presents emplotted modulations of thought and feeling that describe metaphorically, by dwelling on the panther and recording successive thoughts and feelings in relation to its perceived movements, the experience of reading some works of literary art. Attention is focused on the panther and its significance in relation to feeling by means of identification with the panther, emplotment, curtailed gait as a metaphor for curtailed expressive power, and the aural structure of the poem as a unified whole. In this way, the experience of the actual panther is presented imaginatively, in relation to feeling, as mattering for the experience of modern life.

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